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Hard Futurism

by nickland @ Monday, 13 June 2011 11:27

Are you ready for the next big (nasty) thing?

For anyone with interests both in extreme practical futurism and the renaissance of the Sinosphere, Hugo de Garis is an irresistible reference point. A former teacher of Topological Quantum Computing (don't ask) at the International Software School of Wuhan University, and later Director of the Artificial Brain Lab at Xiamen University, de Garis' career symbolizes the emergence of a cosmopolitan Chinese technoscientific frontier, where the outer-edge of futuristic possibility condenses into precisely-engineered reality.

De Garis' work is 'hard' not only because it involves fields such as Topological Quantum Computing, or because – more accessibly -- he's devoted his research energies to the building of brains rather than minds, or even because it has generated questions faster than solutions. In his 'semi-retirement' (since 2010), hard-as-in-difficult, and hard-as-in-hardware, have been supplanted by hard-as-in-mind-numbingly-and-incomprehensibly-brutal – or, in his own words, an increasing obsession with the impending 'Gigadeath' or 'Artilect War'.

According to de Garis, the approach to Singularity will revolutionize and polarize international politics, creating new constituencies, ideologies, and conflicts. The basic dichotomy to which everything must eventually succumb divides those who embrace the emergence of transhuman intelligence, and those who resist it. The former he calls 'cosmists', the latter 'terrans'.

Since massively-augmented and robotically-reinforced 'cosmists' threaten to become invincible, the 'terrans' have no option but pre-emption. To preserve human existence in a recognizable state, it is necessary to violently suppress the cosmist project in advance of its accomplishment. The mere prospect of Singularity is therefore sufficient to provoke a political -- and ultimately military -- convulsion of unprecedented scale. A Terran triumph (which might require much more than just a military victory) would mark an inflection point in deep history, as the super-exponential trend of terrestrial intelligence production – lasting over a billion years -- was capped, or reversed. A Cosmist win spells the termination of human species dominion, and a new epoch in the geological, biological, and cultural process on earth, as the torch of material progress is passed to the emerging *techo sapiens*. With the stakes set so high, the melodramatic grandeur of the de Garis narrative risks understatement no less than hyperbole.

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The giga-magnitude body-count that de Garis postulates for his Artilect (artificial intellect) War is th
Moore's Law or Kurzweilean increasing returns – an extrapolation from exponentiating historical tr
figures from major human conflicts over time. It reflects the accumulating trend to global wars mot
ideologies with ever-increasing stakes. One king is (perhaps) much like another, but a totalitarian s
from a liberal one (even if such paths are ultimately revisable). Between a Terran world order and a
Singularity, the distinction approaches the absolute. The fate of the planet is decided, with costs to

If the de Garis Gigadeath War scenario is pre-emptive in relation to prospective Singularity, his own
emptive – since he insists that world politics must be anticipatively re-forged in order to forestall th
Singularity prediction ripples backwards through waves of pre-adaptation, responding at each stage
to unfold. Change unspools from out of the future, complicating the arrow of time. It is perhaps no
Garis' major research interests is reversible computing, where temporal directionality is unsettled a
engineering.

Does ethnicity and cultural tradition merely dissolve before the tide-front of this imminent Armage
entirely straightforward. Referring to his informal polling of opinion on the coming great divide, de
teaching in China, remarking:

I know from the lectures I've given over the past two decades on species dominance that when I inv
whether they are more Terran than Cosmist, the result is usually 50-50. ... At first, I thought this w
that the species dominance issue is too new, causing people who don't really understand it to vote a
50:50 result. But gradually, it dawned on me that many people felt as ambivalently about the issue
Terran/Cosmist split would run from 40:60 to 60:40 (although I do notice that with my very young
computer science, the Cosmists are at about 80%).

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